

Taking Notes While You Read

As you read the selection, underline or highlight the passages that identify major U.S. values. Then, in the margin next to a marked passage, indicate how prominent the value is in your culture by writing “very strong,” “strong,” “not very strong,” or “weak.”



American Values and Assumptions

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People who grow up in a particular culture share certain values and assumptions. That does not mean they all share exactly the same values to exactly the same extent. It does mean that most of them, most of the time, agree with each other's ideas about what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, and so on. They also agree, mostly, with each other's assumptions about human nature, social relationships, and so on. . . .

Notice that the values and assumptions discussed below overlap with and support each other. In general, they agree with each other. They fit together. A culture can be viewed as a collection of values and assumptions that go together to shape the way a group of people perceives and relates to the world around them.

INDIVIDUALISM

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. They are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They're not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collectivity.

You can see it in the way Americans treat their children. One day I was at a local shopping mall, waiting in line to buy an Orange Julius. (An Orange Julius is a cool drink made in a blender with orange juice, ice, and some other ingredients.) Behind me in the line was a woman with two children, a boy who was about three years old and a girl who was about five. The boy had his hand in the pocket of his blue jeans, and I could hear that he had some coins in there.

The boy asked his mother, “Can I get an Orange Julius?”

“No,” she said to him. “You don't have enough money left for an Orange Julius. Remember you bought that cookie a while ago. You do have enough money for a hot dog. So you could get a hot dog now if you want to. Or, you could save your money, and sometime later when you have enough money, we could come back here and you could get an Orange Julius.”

When I tell this story to people from other countries, they usually react with 7
disbelief. The idea that a child so young would even have his own money to spend,
let alone be expected to decide how to spend it, seems beyond their comprehension.
Here is a young child whose own mother is forcing him to make a decision that
affects not just his situation at the moment – whether or not to get a hot dog – but
that will affect him at some unspecified time in the future, when he will have more
money.

But when Americans hear the story, they usually understand it perfectly well. This 8
mother is helping her son learn to make his own decisions and to be accountable
for his own money. Some American parents might not expect a three-year-old to
make a decision about how to spend money, but they certainly understand what
the mother is doing. She is getting her son ready for a world in which he will be
responsible for his choices and their consequences. Even his own mother won't be
helping him later in life, and he needs to be ready for that.

This particular mother may or may not have owned a copy of Dr. Benjamin 9
Spock's famous book, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, to which millions of American
parents have long turned for information and advice on raising their children. The
most recent version of the book makes this observation:

In the United States . . . very few children are raised to believe that their
personal destiny is to serve their family, their country, their God [as is the
practice in some other countries]. Generally children [in the United States]
are given the feeling that they can set their own aims and occupation
in life, according to their inclinations. We're raising them to be rugged
individualists. . . . (1998; p. 7)

While it has become more acceptable in light of changing economic circumstances 10
(especially higher housing costs) for young adults to live in their parents' house, the
ideal of independence after high school graduation remains. If it is economically
feasible for them to do so, young adult Americans are expected to live apart from
their parents, either on their own or in college, or risk being viewed as immature,
"tied to their mother's apron strings," or otherwise unable to lead a normal,
independent life. . . .

Americans are trained to conceive of themselves as separate individuals, and 11
they assume everyone else in the world is too. When they encounter a person from
abroad who seems to them excessively concerned with the opinions of parents, with
following traditions, or with fulfilling obligations to others, they assume that the
person feels trapped or is weak, indecisive, or "overly dependent." They assume all
people must resent being in situations where they are not "free to make up their own
minds." They assume, furthermore, that after living for a time in the United States,
people will come to feel "liberated" from constraints arising outside themselves and
will be grateful for the opportunity to "do their own thing" and "have it their own
way." As indeed, many are. . . .

The individual that Americans idealize prefers an atmosphere of freedom, where 12
neither the government nor any other external force or agency dictates what the
individual does. For Americans, the idea of individual freedom has strong, positive
connotations.

By contrast, people from many other cultures regard some of the behavior 13
Americans legitimize by the label “individual freedom” to be self-centered and
lacking in consideration for others. . . .

Foreign visitors who understand the degree to which Americans are imbued 14
with the notion that the free, self-reliant individual is the ideal kind of human being
will be able to understand many aspects of American behavior and thinking that
otherwise might not make sense. A very few of the many possible examples:

- Americans see as heroes those individuals who “stand out from the crowd” by doing something first, longest, most often, or otherwise “best.” Examples are aviators Charles Lindbergh¹ and Amelia Earhart,² golfer Tiger Woods, and basketball player Michael Jordan. Perhaps the best example from the world of fiction is the American cowboy as portrayed by such motion-picture actors as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.
- Americans admire people who have overcome adverse circumstances (for example, poverty or a physical handicap) and “succeeded” in life. Black educator Booker T. Washington³ is one example; the blind and deaf author and lecturer Helen Keller⁴ is another.
- Many Americans do not display the degree of respect for their parents that people in more traditional or family-oriented societies commonly do. From their point of view, being born to particular parents was a sort of historical or biological accident. The parents fulfilled their responsibilities to the children while the children were young, and now that the children have reached “the age of independence,” the close child-parent tie is loosened, occasionally even broken.
- It is not unusual for Americans who are beyond the age of about twenty-two (and sometimes younger) and who are still living with their parents to pay their parents for room and board. Elderly parents living with their grown children may do likewise. Paying for room and board is a way of showing independence, self-reliance, and responsibility for oneself.
- Certain phrases one commonly hears among Americans capture their devotion to individualism: “You’ll have to decide that for yourself.” “If you don’t look out for yourself, no one else will.” “Look out for number one.” “Be your own best friend.”

COMPETITION

Individualistic Americans naturally see themselves as being in competition with 15
others. Competitiveness pervades the society. It is obvious in the attention given
to athletic events and star athletes, who are praised for being “real competitors.”

¹ Charles Lindbergh (1902–1974): American pilot who, in 1927, made the first solo, nonstop transatlantic flight.

² Amelia Earhart (1897–1937): First woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean (in 1928) and to fly across it alone (in 1932).

³ Booker T. Washington (1856–1915): Son of a slave who went from working in coal mines to founding a university for African-American students and becoming one of the leading educators of his day.

⁴ Helen Keller (1880–1968): Graduate of Radcliffe College who went on to write and lecture extensively about social causes.

It is also obvious in schools and extracurricular activities for children, where games and contests are assumed to be desirable and beneficial. Competitiveness is less obvious when it is in the minds of people who are consistently comparing themselves with others: who is faster, smarter, richer, better looking; whose children are the most successful; whose husband is the best provider or the best cook or the best lover; which salesperson sold the most during the past quarter; who earned his first million dollars at the earliest age; and so on. People who are competing with others are essentially alone, trying to maintain their superiority and, implicitly, their separateness from others.

PRIVACY

Also closely associated with the value they place on individualism is the importance 16 Americans assign to privacy. Americans assume that people “need some time to themselves” or “some time alone” to think about things or recover their spent psychological energy. Americans have great difficulty understanding people who always want to be with another person, who dislike being alone. Americans tend to regard such people as weak or dependent. . . .

Americans’ attitudes about privacy can be difficult for foreigners to understand. 17 Americans’ houses, yards, and even their offices can seem open and inviting, yet, in the Americans’ minds, there are boundaries that other people are simply not supposed to cross. When the boundaries are crossed, the Americans’ bodies will visibly stiffen and their manner will become cool and aloof.

EQUALITY

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal, 18 as stated in their Declaration of Independence,⁵ that “all men are created equal.” Although they sometimes violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships and sometimes relationships among people from different social classes, Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. “One person, one vote,” they say, conveying the idea that any person’s opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person’s opinion.

Americans are generally quite uncomfortable when someone treats them with 19 obvious deference. They dislike being the subjects of open displays of respect – being bowed to, being deferred to, being treated as though they could do no wrong or make no unreasonable requests. . . .

Foreigners who are accustomed to more obvious displays of respect (such as 20 bowing, averting eyes from the face of the higher status person, or using honorific titles⁶) often overlook the ways in which Americans show respect for people of higher status. They think, incorrectly, that Americans are generally unaware of status differences and disrespectful of other people. What is distinctive about the American outlook on the matter of equality are the underlying assumptions that (1) no matter what a person’s initial station in life, he or she has the opportunity to

⁵ *Declaration of Independence*: Document announcing the creation of the United States and its separation from Great Britain (1776).

⁶ *honorific titles*: Titles of honor or respect.

achieve high standing and (2) everyone, no matter how unfortunate, deserves some basic level of respectful treatment.

INFORMALITY

Their notions of equality lead Americans to be quite informal in their general 21 behavior and in their relationships with other people. Store clerks and table servers, for example, may introduce themselves by their first (given) names and treat customers in a casual, friendly manner. American clerks, like other Americans, have been trained to believe that they are as valuable as any other people, even if they happen to be engaged at a given time in an occupation that others might consider lowly. This informal behavior can outrage foreign visitors who hold high stations in countries where it is not assumed that “all men are created equal.” . . .

People from societies where general behavior is more formal than it is in America 22 are struck by the informality of American speech, dress, and body language. Idiomatic speech and slang are liberally used on most occasions, with formal speech reserved for public events and fairly formal situations. People of almost any station in life can be seen in public wearing jeans, sandals, or other informal attire. People slouch down in chairs or lean on walls or furniture when they talk, rather than maintaining an erect bearing.

A brochure advertising a highly-regarded liberal-arts college contains a 23 photograph showing the college’s president, dressed in shorts and an old T-shirt, jogging past one of the classroom buildings on his campus. Americans are likely to find the photograph appealing: “Here is a college president who’s just like anyone else. He doesn’t think he’s too good for us.”

Likewise, U.S. President George W. Bush frequently allowed himself to be 24 photographed in his jogging attire while out for one of his frequent runs.

The superficial friendliness for which Americans are so well known is related to 25 their informal, egalitarian approach to other people. “Hi!” they will say to just about anyone, or “Howya doin’?” (that is, “How are you doing?” or “How are you?”). This behavior reflects not so much a special interest in the person addressed as a concern (not conscious) for showing that one is a “regular guy,” part of a group of normal, pleasant people – like the jogging college president and the jogging president of his superpower country. . . .

THE FUTURE, CHANGE, AND PROGRESS

Americans are generally less concerned about history and traditions than are people 26 from older societies. “History doesn’t matter,” many of them will say. “It’s the future that counts.” They look ahead. They have the idea that what happens in the future is within their control, or at least subject to their influence. The mature, sensible person, they think, sets goals for the future and works systematically toward them. Americans believe that people, as individuals or working cooperatively together, can change most aspects of the physical and social environment if they decide to do so, then make appropriate plans and get to work. Changes will presumably produce improvements. New things are better than old things.

Closely associated with their assumption that they can bring about desirable 27 changes in the future is the Americans’ assumption that their physical and social environments are subject to human domination or control. Early Americans cleared

forests, drained swamps, and altered the course of rivers in order to “build” the country. Contemporary Americans have gone to the moon in part just to prove they could do so! “If you want to be an American,” says cross-cultural trainer L. Robert Kohls, “you have to believe you can fix it.” . . .

This fundamental American belief in progress and a better future contrasts sharply with the *fatalistic* (Americans are likely to use that term with a negative or critical connotation) attitude that characterizes people from many other cultures, notably Latin American, Asian, and Arab, where there is a pronounced reverence for the past. In those cultures the future is often considered to be in the hands of fate, God, or at least the few powerful people or families that dominate the society. The idea that they could somehow shape their own futures seems naive, arrogant, or even sacrilegious.

Americans are generally impatient with people they see as passively accepting conditions that are less than desirable. “Why don’t they do something about it?” Americans will ask. Americans don’t realize that a large portion of the world’s population sees the world around them not as something they can change, but rather as something to which they must submit, or at least something with which they must seek to live in harmony. . . .

TIME

For Americans, time is a resource that, like water or coal, can be used well or poorly. “Time is money,” they say. “You only get so much time in this life; you’d best use it wisely.” As Americans are trained to see things, the future will not be better than the past or the present unless people use their time for constructive, future-oriented activities. Thus, Americans admire a “well-organized” person, one who has a written list of things to do and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual (that is, arrives at the scheduled time for a meeting or event) and is considerate of other people’s time (that is, does not “waste people’s time” with conversation or other activity that has no visible, beneficial outcome). . . .

The American attitude toward time is not necessarily shared by others, especially non-Europeans. They are more likely to conceive of time as something that is simply there, around them, not something they can “use.” One of the more difficult things many foreign businessmen and students must adjust to in the United States is the notion that time must be saved whenever possible and used wisely every day.

In their efforts to use their time wisely, Americans are sometimes seen by foreign visitors as automatons, unhuman creatures who are so tied to their clocks, their schedules, and their daily planners that they cannot participate in or enjoy the human interactions that are the truly important things in life. “They are like little machines running around,” one foreign visitor said.

The premium Americans place on *efficiency* is closely related to their concepts of the future, change, and time. To do something efficiently is to do it in the way that is quickest and requires the smallest expenditure of resources. This may be why e-mail has become such a popular means of communication in American society. Students commonly correspond with their professors by e-mail rather than waiting to talk with them during their office hours. Likewise, businesspeople frequently check their e-mail before and after work, on the weekend, and even while on vacation.

American businesses sometimes hire “efficiency experts” to review their operations and to suggest ways in which they could accomplish more with the resources they are investing. Popular magazines offer suggestions for more efficient ways to shop, cook, clean house, do errands, raise children, tend the yard, and on and on. The Internet provides immediate access to all kinds of information and products. Americans have come to expect instant responses to phone calls, e-mails, faxes, and other forms of communication. Many quickly become impatient if the responses aren’t immediately forthcoming, even when there is no apparent urgency. . . .

ACHIEVEMENT, ACTION, WORK, AND MATERIALISM

“He’s a hard worker,” one American might say in praise of another. Or, “She gets 34 the job done.” These expressions convey the typical American’s admiration for a person who approaches a task conscientiously and persistently, seeing it through to a successful conclusion. More than that, these expressions convey an admiration for *achievers*, people whose lives are centered around efforts to accomplish some physical, measurable task. . . .

Visitors from abroad commonly remark, “Americans work harder than I expected 35 them to.” (Perhaps these visitors have been excessively influenced by American movies and television programs, which are less likely to show people working than to show them driving around in fast cars or pursuing members of the opposite sex.) While the so-called “Protestant work ethic”⁷ may have lost some of its hold on Americans, there is still a strong belief that the ideal person is a “hard worker.” A hard worker is one who “gets right to work” on a task, works efficiently, and completes the task in a way that meets reasonably high standards of quality. . . .

More generally, Americans like *action*. They do indeed believe it is important 36 to devote significant energy to their jobs or to other daily responsibilities. Beyond that, they tend to believe they should be *doing* something most of the time. They are usually not content, as people from many countries are, to sit for hours and talk with other people. They get restless and impatient. They believe they should be doing something, or at least making plans and arrangements for doing something later.

People without the Americans’ action orientation often see Americans as 37 frenzied, always “on the go,” never satisfied, compulsively active, and often impatient. They may, beyond that, evaluate Americans negatively for being unable to relax and enjoy life’s pleasures. Even recreation, for Americans, is often a matter of acquiring lavish equipment, making elaborate plans, then going somewhere to do something. . . .

Americans tend to define and evaluate people by the jobs they have. (“Who is 38 she?” “She’s the vice president in charge of personal loans at the bank.”) Family backgrounds, educational attainments, and other characteristics are considered less important in identifying people than the jobs they have. . . .

Americans tend to spend money rather freely on material goods. Items that 39 were once considered luxuries, such as personal computers, telephone answering machines, microwave ovens, and electric garage-door openers are now considered “necessities” by many Americans. Credit cards, which are widely available even to teenagers, encourage spending, and of course the scale and scope of the advertising

⁷ *Protestant work ethic*: Belief that with hard work and self-discipline, a person will eventually succeed.

industry is well known. Americans are often criticized for being so “materialistic,” so concerned with acquiring possessions. For Americans, though, this materialism is natural and proper. They have been taught that it is a good thing to achieve, to work hard, acquire more material badges of their success, and in the process assure a better future for themselves and their immediate families. And, like people elsewhere, they do what they are taught.

DIRECTNESS AND ASSERTIVENESS

Americans, as we’ve said before, generally consider themselves to be frank, open, and direct in their dealings with other people. “Let’s lay our cards on the table,”⁸ they say. Or, “Let’s stop playing games and get to the point.” These and many other common expressions convey the Americans’ idea that people should explicitly state what they think and what they want from other people.

Americans usually assume that conflicts or disagreements are best settled by means of forthright discussions among the people involved. If I dislike something you are doing, I should tell you about it directly so you will know, clearly and from me personally, how I feel about it. Bringing in other people to mediate a dispute is considered somewhat cowardly, the act of a person without enough courage to speak directly to someone else. Mediation is, however, slowly gaining in popularity in recent years.

The word *assertive* is the adjective Americans commonly use to describe the person who plainly and directly expresses feelings and requests. People who are inadequately assertive can take “assertiveness-training classes.” What Americans consider assertive is, however, often judged as aggressive by some non-Americans and sometimes by Americans – if the person referred to is a woman. . . .

Americans are not taught, as people in many Asian countries are, that they should mask their emotional responses. Their words, the tone of their voices, or their facial expressions will usually reveal when they are feeling angry, unhappy, confused, or happy and content. They do not think it improper to display these feelings, at least within limits. Many Asians feel embarrassed around Americans who are exhibiting a strong emotional response to something. On the other hand, Latin Americans and Arabs are generally inclined to display their emotions more openly than Americans do, and to view Americans as unemotional and “cold.”

Americans, however, are often less direct and open than they realize. There are, in fact, many restrictions on their willingness to discuss things openly. It is difficult to categorize those restrictions, and the restrictions are often not “logical” in the sense of being consistent with each other. Generally, though, Americans are reluctant to speak openly when:

- the topic is in an area they consider excessively personal, such as unpleasant body or mouth odors, sexual functioning, or personal inadequacies;
- they want to say “no” to a request that has been made of them but do not want to offend or “hurt the feelings of” the person who made the request;
- they are not well enough acquainted with the other person to be confident

⁸ to lay one’s cards on the table: To state one’s opinion honestly.

that direct discussion will be accepted in the constructive way that is intended; and, paradoxically,

- they know the other person very well (it might be a spouse or close friend) and they do not wish to risk giving offense and creating negative feelings by talking about some delicate problem. . . .

All of this is to say that Americans, even though they see themselves as properly assertive and even though they often behave in open and direct ways, have limits on their openness. It is not unusual for them to try to avoid direct confrontations with other people when they are not confident that the interaction can be carried out in a constructive way that will result in an acceptable compromise. . . .

Despite these limitations, Americans are generally more direct and open than people from almost all other countries with the exception of Israel and Australia. They will not try to mask their emotions, as Scandinavians or Japanese tend to do. They are much less concerned with “face” (that is, avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others) than most Asians are. To them, being honest is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Americans use the words *pushy* or *aggressive* to describe a person who is excessively assertive in expressing opinions or making requests. The line between acceptable assertiveness and unacceptable aggressiveness is difficult to draw. Iranians and people from other countries where forceful arguing and negotiating are common forms of interaction risk being seen as aggressive or pushy when they treat Americans in the way they treat people at home.

Reading Journal

In your journal, write about one of the following topics.

- 1 Explain what a visitor to your country should know in order to avoid intercultural misunderstandings.
- 2 Describe an experience you had in a foreign country or culture that helped you understand it better.
- 3 Choose a topic of your own related to the reading.

Main Ideas

One of the most important skills you can develop as a good reader is the ability to recognize the **main idea** in a piece of writing. Although writers often include many ideas, there is usually a central point, or message, they wish to convey. When you read something, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- What main idea is the writer trying to communicate?
- How does the main idea relate to other ideas in the reading?
- How does the writer develop his or her main point? What does the writer want me to remember about this subject?